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UNCLAS VILNIUS 000088

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STATE FOR R, CA, EUR/PPD AND EUR/NB

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: LITHUANIA: FAVORABLE PRESS FOR RICE-CHERTOFF OPEN DOORS ANNOUNCEMENT

REF: STATE 7169

1. SUMMARY: Post actively publicized the January 17 Rice-Chertoff announcement on America's initiatives to welcome tourists, students and business travelers. The Lithuanian media reacted quickly and favorably. Keying off a detailed press release, national radio interviewed the PAO and played the news during peak listening hours. An op-ed by the Ambassador reached out to Lithuania's second city, and the leading national daily scheduled an interview with the Ambassador for January 27. Public reaction as viewed in comments on Internet news portals was quite positive. The major lament in the comments was about the threat of brain-drain. End Summary.

2. Post took immediate steps following the January 17 announcement to inform the public of the new initiatives underway to renew America's welcome to international visitors. An Embassy press release outlined U.S. efforts to ease the procedures surrounding business travel and to encourage students and academics to pursue their studies in the United States. An ambassadorial op-ed piece summarized the new initiatives to ensure that visiting Lithuanians feel welcome and praised Lithuanian efforts toward qualification in the Visa Waiver Program. Lithuanian Radio then broadcast an interview with the PAO on the announcement, which aired during the evening commuting hour and the following morning and noon news broadcasts. The Ambassador accepted a January 30 interview on the subject with Lietuvos Rytas, the country's largest and most influential daily.

3. BNS, a national news wire service, quickly published an article outlining the Embassy press release and the three-part plan to welcome visitors to the United States without compromising security. The BNS piece was subsequently picked up by the top two popular internet portals, DELFI and OMNI, as well as the website of Lithuanian National Television.

4. DELFI offers readers the opportunity to comment on news pieces. The vast majority of reader reactions to the Open Doors, Secure Borders announcement have been positive. Many of the written comments approve of, sympathize with, and even admire the American goal to attract talented, educated people to the United States as an effective strategy for competing in a globalized world. Others compare the United States to Europe, concluding that Europe is a preferable destination "for earning money", whereas travel to the United States is too costly. The few negative comments allege a cynical, American-orchestrated brain drain of the skilled Lithuanian workforce; others voice grievances about visa denials.

5. Comment: U.S. visa policy is always newsworthy in Lithuania. The media sometimes carry stories of those who were denied visas. By proactively pushing the Rice-Chertoff announcement with the material provided by the Department (reftel), we believe we helped shape the debate here in a positive way. We will continue our efforts to publicize the U.S. goal to welcome as many legitimate Lithuanian visitors as possible to study and travel in the United States. End comment.

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